

The Worst Hitters in Baseball History

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Abstract

In this paper we are going to look at several metrics for determining the worst hitter in major league baseball history.

Introduction

Books have been written trying to determine who have been the best hitters in baseball history. In this paper, we are going to consider the opposite end of the baseball talent spectrum. We are going to look at the worst hitters in baseball history. But first, a disclaimer.

Disclaimer

There have been some people who have played major league baseball who had no business doing so. Eddie Gaedel, for instance, is a classic example of someone who had no business wearing a major league uniform. As a publicity stunt, St. Louis Browns' owner and showman Bill Veeck hired Gaedel, a man with dwarfism who stood 3 feet 7 inches tall for a one-plate appearance. He walked on four pitches.

In the early years of major league ball, teams often did not have very large rosters. Sometimes on a road trip they would even leave some of their players home. Then, if a player was hurt, they would be short-handed. To fix that, they might ask the crowd, "who wants to play?" They might get someone who can play. But sometimes they got someone who had no business walking on a baseball field.

In more recent years, however, if a man makes it to the major leagues, he is NOT a bad hitter. Such things are relative. He may be the worst hitter in the league, but the league is made up of the best baseball players in the world. So, with the exception of Gaedel, and maybe one or two other flukes, when I say "worst hitters," I realize I am describing men who are far better than most of us. These men were typically stars on every team they played on below the major league level.

Criteria

How do we determine whether a hitter is good or bad? For years, batting average (AVG) was the standard yardstick for determining offensive value. In recent years, Bill James and others have helped baseball teams see that batting average is not a great measure of offensive prowess. The name of the game is scoring runs. You score runs if your batters do not make outs. It does not matter if they get a hit or a walk. What matters is that they get on base. Gene Tenace rarely had strong batting averages, but he drew a lot of walks. Now we realize that on-base percentage (OBP) is more important than batting average. But even on-base percentage has a stronger replacement. OPS, which stands for "on-base plus slugging," values getting on base regardless of how one gets on but places greater emphasis on bases reached. If two players have the same on-base percentage but one hits mostly singles while the other hits a lot of doubles and home runs, the second player is more valuable. This is indicated by OPS.

We will follow that baseball journey by first looking at batting average, then on-base percentage, and then OPS. We are going to consider the worst seasons in each of those areas,

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with different numbers of at bats or plate appearances. Since pitchers are typically weaker hitters, it is reasonable to consider pitchers and non-pitchers first separately. And to keep this paper at a reasonable length, we will only consider the non-pitchers this time.

Worst Hitting Season - Non-pitchers

Lowest AVG with At Least 500 Plate Appearances (PA)

1	Rob Deer	1991	.179	Tigers
1	Dan Uggla	2013	.179	Braves
3	John Gochnauer	1903	.185	Indians
4	John Gochnauer	1902	.185	Indians
5	Bill Hallman	1901	.185	Indians/Phillies
6	Monte Cross	1904	.189	A's
7	Germany Smith	1890	.191	Dodgers
8	Frankie Crosetti	1940	.194	Yankees
9	Jim Levey	1933	.195	Browns
10	Tom Tresh	1968	.195	Yankees

I had never heard of John Gochnauer until I started working on this topic. Based on this chart it is not too hard to see why. He batted .364 (only 11 at bats (AB)) in 1901. That earned him more playing time in 1902 and 1903. His success did not carry over to those two years. That earned him the end of his major league career. Rob Deer and Dan Uggla are good examples of players who benefit slightly by emphasis on OPS, since both hit for a good bit of power. I will have to admit to a bit of enjoyment seeing two Yankees on this list, since I despise the Yankees.

Lowest AVG with At Least 400 PA

1	Joe Gerhardt	1885	.155	Giants
2	Adam Dunn	2011	.159	White Sox
3	Jim Canavan	1892	.166	Cubs
4	Charlie Bastian	1885	.167	Phillies
5	Dal Maxvill	1969	.175	Cardinals
6	Jim Lillie	1886	.175	Cowboys
T7	Rob Deer	1991	.179	Tigers
T7	Dan Uggla	2013	.179	Braves
9	Tony Smith	1910	.181	Dodgers
10	Lee Tannehill	1906	.183	White Sox

Adam Dunn sat out a good bit of the end of the 2011 season since he otherwise would have had the worst batting average in history for a player who qualified for the batting title (502 PA). But he was not quite the worst for the 400+ PA crowd. Gerhardt had a lengthy career. Never particularly strong offensively but 1885 was easily his worst season. Notice that Deer and Uggla appear again.

Lowest AVG with At Least 300 PA

1	Bill Bergen	1909	.139	Dodgers
2	Charley Bassett	1885	.144	Grays
3	Sam Crane	1886	.153	Wolverines/Maroons
4	Joe Gerhardt	1885	.155	Giants

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5	Les Moss	1947	.157	Browns
6	Bill Bergen	1906	.159	Dodgers
7	Adam Dunn	2011	.159	White Sox
8	Billy Sullivan	1909	.162	White Sox
9	Stephen Drew	2014	.162	Red Sox/Yankees
10	Stump Wiedman	1884	.163	Wolverines

Note the name "Bill Bergen." He makes two appearances on this list. We will see that name again. Dunn still makes the list, even with the lower PA threshold. And Stephen Drew adds another modern name to the list. And another Yankee, though only for part of the season.

Lowest AVG with At Least 200 PA

1	Frank O'Rourke	1912	.122	Braves
2	Bill Killefer	1910	.124	Browns
3	Bill Bergen	1911	.132	Dodgers
4	Ray Oyler	1968	.135	Tigers
5	Jim Keenan	1890	.139	Reds
6	Bill Bergen	1909	.139	Dodgers
7	Jack O'Neill	1902	.141	Cardinals
8	Fritz Buelow	1904	.141	Tigers/Indians
9	Charley Bassett	1885	.144	Grays
10	Charlie Armbruster	1906	.144	Red Sox

Our next drop in threshold left Adam Dunn off the list, though it adds another abysmal season for Bill Bergen. This chart also shows why the Detroit Tigers moved a gold glove outfielder to play shortstop during the 1968 World Series in order to not have to watch Ray Oyler try to hit.

You may have noticed that a large number of the years we are seeing are in the Dead Ball Era, 1901-1919. As the name of the era implies, offensive production was markedly lower during that time than in almost any other era of baseball history. A good number of others are from the 19th century, when the overall talent level had much more variety than in the modern era.

Lowest AVG with At Least 100 PA

1	Ed Connolly	1931	.075	Red Sox
2	Sandy Nava	1884	.095	Grays
3	Mike Jordan	1890	.096	Pirates
4	Brandon Larson	2003	.101	Reds
5	Antonio Perez	2006	.102	A's
6	Rich Gedman	1991	.106	Cardinals
7	Ben Egan	1915	.108	Indians
8	Jose Gonzalez	1991	.111	Dodgers/Pirates/Indians
9	John Humphries	1883	.112	Giants
10	Gus Gil	1967	.115	Indians

These are all new names. They include a surprising number of more modern performances. Particularly surprising to me is the name of Rich Gedman, since he had several very productive years early in his career.

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Most ABs, Minimal Hits (H)

These two charts are just special cases of what would be very low batting averages.

Most ABs 0 H

1	Eugenio Velez	2011	37	Dodgers
2	Hal Finney	1936	35	Pirates

Most ABs 1 H

1	Skeeter Shelton	1915	40	Yankees
T2	Gene Moriarity	1885	39	Wolverines
T2	Corky Miller	2004	39	Reds

Now we turn our attention to OBP.

Lowest OBP with At Least 500 PA

1	Hal Lanier	1968	.222	Giants
2	Andres Thomas	1989	.228	Braves
3	Hobe Ferris	1909	.232	Browns
4	Fred Raymer	1905	.232	Braves
5	Bobby Lowe	1904	.236	Pirates/Tigers
6	Hunter Hill	1904	.236	Browns/Senators
7	Jim Levey	1933	.237	Browns
8	Bill Hallman	1901	.238	Indians/Phillies
9	Billy O'Brien	1888	.238	Statesmen
10	Hal Lanier	1967	.239	Giants

When we switch to OBP we start seeing another name pop up. Hal Lanier was a weak-hitting shortstop for the Giants in the pitching dominated 1960s. His worst year, 1968, was called the Year of the Pitcher. But Lanier was never particularly strong.

Lowest OBP with At Least 400 PA

1	Jim Lillie	1886	.197	Cowboys
2	Joe Gerhardt	1885	.203	Giants
3	John Cahill	1886	.214	Maroons
4	Mario Mendoza	1979	.216	Mariners
5	Rob Picciolo	1977	.218	A's
6	Hal Lanier	1968	.222	Giants
7	J.P. Arencibia	2013	.227	Blue Jays
8	Andres Thomas	1989	.228	Braves
9	Alex Gonzalez	2000	.229	Marlins
10	Bob Lillis	1963	.229	Astros

Dropping to 400 PA bumps Lanier down the list considerably and introduces another name, famous to those who follow the quirkier side of baseball. Mario Mendoza was immortalized by George Brett. Brett borrowed a phrase used by teammates to denote poor batting averages. He told sportscasters his slow start one year was not all that bad because he was not below "The Mendoza Line."

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Lowest OBP with At Least 300 PA

1	Bill Bergen	1909	.163	Dodgers
2	Bill Bergen	1906	.175	Dodgers
3	Frank Meinke	1884	.179	Wolverines
4	Bill Bergen	1908	.189	Dodgers
5	Davy Force	1880	.197	Bisons
6	Jim Lillie	1886	.197	Cowboys
7	Charley Bassett	1885	.197	Grays
8	Stump Wiedman	1884	.198	Wolverines
T9	Bill Bergen	1901	.199	Reds
T9	Ossee Schreckengost	1904	.199	A's

Dropping down to 300 PA brings an old friend back with a vengeance. Bill Bergen has four of the nine worst OBP in history for players with at least 300 PA. And three of the worst four. To make it worse, his three worst ones are significantly worse than number five on the list.

Lowest OBP with At Least 200 PA

1	Redleg Snyder	1876	.155	Red Stockings
2	Bill Bergen	1909	.163	Dodgers
3	Barney Gilligan	1879	.171	Blues
4	Doc Bushong	1882	.174	Ruby Legs
5	Brandon Wood	2010	.174	Angels
6	Bill Bergen	1906	.175	Dodgers
7	Art Croft	1878	.176	Browns
8	Silver Flint	1880	.176	Cubs
9	Frank O'Rourke	1912	.177	Braves
10	Frank Meinke	1884	.179	Wolverines

Our next step down still sees Bill Bergen in a starring role. He is not the worst, but he still has two of the worst six. The only modern name on this list is Brandon Wood. Wood was touted as a future star for the Angels. Sadly, he never did make the transition from minor league star to the major leagues.

Lowest OBP with At Least 100 PA

1	John Humphries	1883	.120	Giants
2	Ed Connolly	1931	.131	Red Sox
3	Rich Gedman	1991	.140	Cardinals
4	John Kelly	1882	.143	Blues
5	Frank Cox	1884	.144	Wolverines
6	Pickles Dillhoefer	1917	.144	Cubs
7	Mike Laga	1988	.147	Cardinals
8	Ed Wheeler	1902	.152	Dodgers
9	Ace Parker	1937	.153	A's
10	Redleg Snyder	1876	.155	Red Stockings

Bergen is not on this list. Gedman shows up again. One interesting name is Ace Parker. Despite his rather weak 1937 performance, Parker was elected to the Hall of Fame. (The Pro Football

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Hall of Fame, not baseball.) His debut in the major leagues was in 1937. Things went better in 1938 but not good enough, leading him to focus on football.

Now on to OPS, the best of these three metrics for gauging offensive prowess.

Lowest OPS with At Least 500 PA

1	Hal Lanier	1968	.461	Giants
2	Hunter Hill	1904	.462	Browns/Senators
3	Bill Hallman	1901	.473	Indians/Phillies
4	Jim Levey	1933	.477	Browns
5	Fred Raymer	1905	.479	Braves
6	John Gochnauer	1902	.485	Indians
7	Charles Moran	1904	.490	Senators/Browns
8	Germany Smith	1890	.491	Dodgers
9	Bobby Lowe	1904	.494	Pirates/Tigers
10	Hal Lanier	1967	.494	Giants

A low OPS is probably indicative of a low batting average, few walks and little to no power. Hal Lanier shows up again. Twice. The name I find particularly surprising on this list is Bobby Lowe. Lowe is one of the few players in history to hit four home runs in one game. In 1894, his batting average was .346 and his OPS was .920. But by 1904, Lowe was not the same ballplayer. He hung around for a few more years, but they came closer to resembling 1904 than 1894.

Lowest OPS with At Least 400 PA

1	Jim Lillie	1886	.394	Cowboys
2	Joe Gerhardt	1885	.399	Giants
3	Bobby Byrne	1908	.450	Cardinals
4	Hal Lanier	1968	.461	Giants
5	Hunter Hill	1904	.462	Browns/Senators
6	Pete Childs	1902	.462	Phillies
7	Billy Sullivan	1908	.463	White Sox
8	Bob Lillis	1963	.466	Astros
9	Mario Mendoza	1979	.466	Mariners
10	Bill Hallman	1901	.473	Indians/Phillies

Hal Lanier is again on the list, but a good bit behind Jim Lillie. We again see Joe Gerhardt and Mario Mendoza. It is no surprise that many names make multiple appearances on our lists.

Lowest OPS with At Least 300 PA

1	Bill Bergen	1909	.319	Dodgers
2	Bill Bergen	1906	.359	Dodgers
3	Stump Wiedman	1884	.381	Wolverines
4	Charley Bassett	1885	.383	Grays
5	Jim Lillie	1886	.394	Cowboys
6	Joe Gerhardt	1885	.399	Giants
7	Billy Sullivan	1909	.400	White Sox

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8	Davy Force	1880	.400	Bisons
9	Bill Bergen	1908	.404	Dodgers
10	Sam Crane	1886	.407	Wolverines/Maroons

Dropping down to 300 PA drops Lanier from the list, but we find our old friend Bill Bergen. (Three times, including the two worst.) Bergen's .319 OPS in 1909 is significantly lower than any of the others. So bad, in fact, that even dropping the PA more will not rescue him.

Lowest OPS with At Least 200 PA

1	Bill Bergen	1909	.319	Dodgers
2	Frank O'Rourke	1912	.325	Braves
3	Redleg Snyder	1876	.331	Red Stockings
4	Bill Bergen	1911	.337	Dodgers
5	Bill Killefer	1910	.339	Browns
6	Bill Bergen	1910	.357	Dodgers
7	Bill Bergen	1906	.359	Dodgers
8	Art Croft	1878	.361	Browns
9	Doc Bushong	1882	.368	Ruby Legs
10	Jack O'Neill	1902	.371	Cardinals

Bergen's .319 from 1909 is still the worst. But at least now he has some competition from a couple of others. However, he still nails down four of the seven worst spots.

Lowest OPS with At Least 100 PA

1	Ed Connolly	1931	.217	Red Sox
2	John Humphries	1883	.242	Giants
3	Sandy Nava	1884	.268	Grays
4	Ed Wheeler	1902	.277	Dodgers
5	John Dodge	1912	.287	Phillies
6	John Kelly	1882	.297	Blues
7	Ben Egan	1915	.297	Indians
8	George Baker	1885	.301	Maroons
9	Pickles Dillhoefer	1917	.302	Cubs
10	Mike Laga	1988	.307	Cardinals

Finally, dropping down to a threshold of 100 PA rescues Bergen. For those who do not follow baseball statistics closely, it may be hard to realize exactly how bad Ed Connolly's .217 OPS really is. His 93 AB, five walks, one hit-by-pitch and one sacrifice gave him exactly 100 PA. He had only seven hits for a .075 AVG. Only one of those hits, a double, was for extra bases. He only walked five times. It is no surprise that the Red Sox did not let him bat more often.

The last category we will consider is strikeouts (SO). If a batter hits the ball, he at least has a chance to have something useful happen. If he swings and misses too much, nothing useful can happen. The following charts, presented with no comment, cite some of the worst hitters for putting the bat on the ball.

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Most SO in 20 AB Or Less

			SO	AB	
1	Domingo Santana	2014	14	17	Astros
T2	Jack Lind	1975	12	20	Brewers
T2	Troy Afenir	1987	12	20	Astros
T2	Dean Palmer	1989	12	19	Rangers
T2	David Ortiz	1999	12	20	Twins
T6	Charlie Maxwell	1952	11	15	Red Sox
T6	Karl Pagel	1982	11	18	Indians
T6	Nigel Wilson	1993	11	16	Marlins
T6	Wily Mo Pena	2002	11	18	Reds
T6	Chin-Lung Hu	2011	11	20	Mets

Most SO in 10 AB Or Less

			SO	AB	
1	Matt Young	2012	9	10	Tigers
2	Nick Koback	1954	8	10	Pirates
T3	Alex George	1955	7	10	A's
T3	Brent Clevlen	2007	7	10	Tigers
T3	Bill Hall	2012	7	9	Orioles

Most AB with PA = SO (also same men for AB = SO)

T1	Larry Pratt	1914	4	Red Sox
T1	Gene Ratliff	1965	4	Astros

Most SO with No More Than 500 PA

1	Adam Dunn	2011	177	496	White Sox
2	Tyler Flowers	2014	159	442	White Sox

Most SO with No More Than 400 PA

1	Juan Francisco	2013	138	385	Braves/Brewers
2	Jon Singleton	2014	134	362	Astros

Most SO with No More Than 300 PA

1	Cody Ransom	2012	109	282	Diamondbacks/Brewers
2	Brett Wallace	2013	104	285	Astros

Most SO with No More Than 200 PA

T1	Rob Deer	1985	71	187	Giants
T1	Kelly Shoppach	2010	71	187	Rays

Most SO with No More Than 100 PA

T1	Dave Nicholson	1965	40	94	White Sox
T1	Ron Karkovice	1987	40	95	White Sox
T1	Jose Bautista	2004	40	96	Orioles/Rays/Royals/Pirates

Most PA with SO in More Than Half PA

Brian Bixler	2009	26	46	Pirates
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Conclusion

To truly answer the question of who is the worst hitter in history, we would need to do some adjustment for the era in which a player competed. That analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. Based on what we have seen, I think it is fairly reasonable to conclude that, in the modern era, Hal Lanier was the worst. But for complete futility at bat, no one comes close to Bill Bergen. In spite of his poor hitting, he had a 10-year major league career. His overall fielding, and record knack for turning double plays, explains the length of his career. He also played with a great hitting Giant team with Willie Mayes and Willie McCovey, and that helped prolong his career as well.

Biographical Sketch

Fred Worth received his B.S. in Mathematics from Evangel College in Springfield, Missouri in 1982. He received his M.S. in Applied Mathematics in 1987 and his Ph.D. in Mathematics in 1991 from the University of Missouri-Rolla where his son is currently attending school. He has been teaching at Henderson State University since August 1991. He is a member of the Society for American Baseball Research and the Mathematical Association of America. And he hates the Yankees.

The Legend of Belle

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Belle was Daddy's beloved liver-spotted pointer, probably named after Daddy's mistress, of twenty-five years, Thelma Belle, much to Mother's dismay. Daddy had numerous bird dogs, setters and pointers, but Belle was Daddy's favorite. Belle died on a point while flushing a covey in front of Freeman Cagle, her trainer and Daddy's hunting buddy. Mr. Cagle carried Belle in his arms into the store to show Daddy, Mother and me. Mr. Cagle was in his sixties at the time, Daddy and Mother in their fifties, and I was thirteen years old.

Old and fresh tears made rivers down his dirt-smudged face as he approached Daddy and placed Belle into Daddy's waiting arms. That was the first time, I ever saw a grown man and my daddy cry. Daddy escorted Mr. Cagle out the side door of the store as they lovingly and gently placed Belle into the bed of Daddy's 1962 red-over-white F100 Ford pickup. After Daddy closed the tailgate of the pickup, he opened the driver's side door of the truck and took out a flask of Jack Daniels sipping whisky. After both men had taken long draws from the flask, Mr. Cagle shared Belle's final hunting trip and death. The ancient and sacred requiem ritual had begun.

Belle was a gift from Horace and Paul Jones for Daddy's birthday, which was a community event. Salesmen and jobbers provided the buns, bread, soft drinks, chips and condiments with